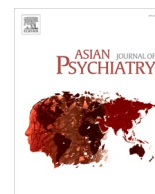




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On online learning and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: Perspectives from the Philippines

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The negative mental health consequences of online learning among students can include increased anxiety and absenteeism. These can stem from the increased demand for new technological skills, productivity, and information overload (Poalses and Bezuidenhout, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these consequences when educational institutions shifted from face-to-face activities to mostly online learning modalities to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Malolos et al., 2021). While all students may be affected, students from lower socioeconomic localities have higher mental distress due to their limited financial capacity to obtain the necessary gadgets and internet connectivity. Given these, a digital divide stemming from socioeconomic inequalities can result in mental health disparities among students during the pandemic (Cleofas and Rocha, 2021). In a recent article, Hou et al. (2020) noted that young Chinese students from resource-scarce localities may be at risk for mental disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic due to social and cultural factors. Similar observations were noted in the Philippines, a developing and resource-scarce country. Children had a higher risk for poor mental health compared to adults in the Philippines partly due to their shift to online learning modalities during the pandemic (Malolos et al., 2021). Thus, measures cognizant of the resources of a developing country are needed to mitigate the mental stresses from online learning including videoconferencing.

1. Open cameras only when necessary

Adopting new technologies generally is not easy. Users of videoconferencing technologies for synchronous online learning activities have found it mentally exhausting (Bailenson, 2021). To combat this exhaustion, several suggestions by authors from a study in the United States included the opening of cameras to be visible to other students in the videoconference (Peper et al., 2021). While this suggestion might be feasible in developed countries with good internet connectivity, this may pose an additional mental health burden to developing nations with unstable internet connections. It was found that connectivity errors and constantly seeing one's self during videoconferencing had resulted in high stress levels and poor mental health among students (Dhawan, 2020). Thus, these opening of cameras may pose as an additional source

of mental health burden rather than wellbeing in developing nations. Instead, it might be helpful to ask students to open their cameras during videoconference only when necessary.

2. Avoid requiring school uniforms during online classes

It was also recommended to reenact the work and study environment at home including the wearing of school clothing (Peper et al., 2021). This recommendation might be better suited in countries with high economic and financial resources. In developing and resource-scarce areas such as the Philippines, wearing school uniforms may pose an additional financial burden to an already economically constrained population as a result of economic and social lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hou et al., 2020; Malolos et al., 2021). Thus, it may be imperative to avoid requiring school uniforms during online classes to alleviate the economic cost of its maintenance. In doing so, additional worries and stresses from the pandemic's economic burden can be reduced.

3. Take regular classroom breaks and avoid multitasking

To improve concentration and burnout from online learning activities, it was also recommended to avoid multitasking and take a break regularly every thirty minutes. Doing these may also lower mental stresses and screen fatigue in long videoconferencing sessions (Peper et al., 2021). To do these, curricular learning activities can be modified to include regular breaks and focused activities.

4. Mental health promotion training for teachers

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, several studies have noted that it is necessary to improve teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and behavior towards mental illness to foster a mentally healthy school environment. This has been previously done through mental health literacy campaigns, workshops, and seminars (Weist et al., 2017). With the possible increase of mental health burden among young students and limited mental health resources in the setting of developing countries such as the Philippines

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(Malolos et al., 2021), it might be necessary to renew the efforts on these mental health promotion activities among teachers.

5. Promote self-care activities

Developing nations, such as the Philippines, often have scarce mental health resources (Malolos et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2019). Due to this scarcity, self-care activities may be the only option for some people to maintain their mental wellbeing and avoid poor mental health (World Health Organization, 2019). In promoting self-care, it is important to ensure adequate attention is paid to the body, mind, family, and environment. Thus, it is important to promote regular exercise and relaxing activities during breaks from online classes. Likewise, it is important to remind young students to foster a good social relationship with friends and loved ones despite the physical distance during the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2013). Doing these, may not only promote mental health but reduce the risk factors associated with poor mental health (World Health Organization, 2019). Thus, self-care in developing nations may be ever more crucial.

Generally, learning that considers the child's mental health should take cognizance of the circumstances that children faced in their daily social environment. While there is evidence that specific actions contribute to better mental health among children, the outcomes are contingent on context. In the case of a developing country context, teaching children in the COVID-19 era requires the consideration of existing social inequalities and economic constraints to safeguard their mental health in the online learning environment.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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